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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANJUL 000203

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [GA](#)

SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: UPDATE ON PRIVATE NEWSPAPER'S STATUS

REF: A. BANJUL 193

[1](#)B. BANJUL 184

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH STAFFORD, REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) In April 3 meeting with Information Minister MacDouall-Gaye, Ambassador stressed our concern over the GOTG's closure of "The Independent" and detention of its personnel; the Minister professed ignorance as to the reasons for authorities' action and as to prospects for the paper's resuming publication. In subsequent discussion April 3, editor-in-chief of "The Point," Pap Saine, attributed the GOTG's action to March 27 articles in "The Independent" critical of President Jammeh and confided that it had been unwise to provoke him in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt. Saine thought that "The Independent" would likely remain closed for some time. Ambassador will register our concern over the action against "The Independent" in meetings he has requested with Jammeh, the Interior Minister, and other officials. END SUMMARY.

APPROACH TO INFORMATION MINISTER

[1](#)2. (C) Ambassador met April 3 with Information Minister Neneh MacDouall-Gaye, expressing concern over authorities' March 28 closure of the independent daily, "The Independent," and the ongoing detention of its General Manager and Editor-in-Chief (ref a). Ambassador urged that the GOTG promptly allow the journal to resume publication and either release its detained staff or make clear the evidence of wrongdoing behind their detention.

[1](#)3. (C) Minister MacDouall-Gaye professed ignorance of the reasons for authorities' action against "The Independent," saying she could not confirm reports that the move stemmed from articles in the paper's March 27 edition that were critical of President Jammeh. She added, though, that it was "important" for the media to avoid "irresponsible criticism" of the GOTG "in this sensitive period" following the failed coup attempt March 21. The Minister stated that she was unable to say when the paper might be allowed to resume publication.

A PROMINENT JOURNALIST'S ASSESSMENT

[1](#)4. (C) In subsequent conversation with Ambassador April 3, Pap Saine, the Editor-in-Chief of another privately owned journal, "The Point," said he was certain that the GOTG's action against "The Independent" was due to its March 27 articles replaying opposition allegations of Jammeh's

excessive wealth and condemning coups -- while weaving in criticism of Jammeh's policies since his own successful coup in 1994. Saine asserted that, in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt, Jammeh was in no mood to tolerate such criticism and that the management of "The Independent" had been unwise to provoke him. Saine, who accused "The Independent" of an anti-Jammeh/pro-opposition bias, stated that it had long been the President's most vociferous critic among the privately owned journals and that authorities' action had not come as a surprise to him.

15. (C) In response to Ambassador's query, Saine gave a gloomy assessment of prospects for "The Independent," saying its period of closure was likely to be prolonged. Asked about the status of the detainees, Saine stated that they remained in custody and had yet to be charged with specific offenses.

COMMENT

16. (C) As previously reported (ref b), Saine is no supporter of the Jammeh Government, but his paper, "The Point," is noticeably more balanced than "The Independent" in its treatment of the GOTG. In recent days, "The Point" has made clear its opposition to the failed coup attempt -- while refraining, unlike "The Independent," from taking a swipe at Jammeh over his 1994 takeover. At the same time, "The Point," in its commentaries, has appealed to the GOTG for the prompt investigation of detainees and release of those cleared of involvement in the failed coup plot; it has also registered concern over the actions against "The Independent."

17. (C) Saine's gloomy assessment of prospects for "The Independent" and its detained personnel was troubling, as was the Information Minister's profession of ignorance about the episode; as the GOTG's point-person for dealing with the press, she likely knows more than she indicated. In any

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event, Ambassador plans to stress our concern in meetings he has requested with Jammeh, Interior Minister, and other officials. END COMMENT.
STAFFORD